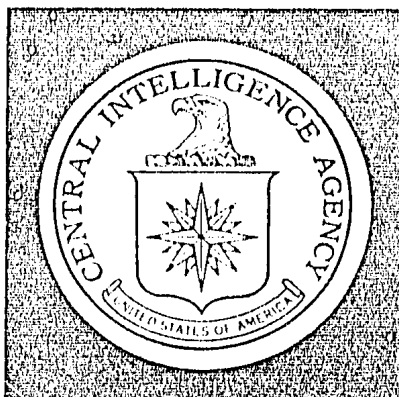


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The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh

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10 January 1968

NSA review completed

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
10 January 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh

Summary

In the past several weeks there have been a number of indications that the enemy is building up its forces in the Laotian panhandle west of the Demilitarized Zone.

The target primarily threatened by these forces appears to be the allied base at Khe Sanh in western Quang Tri Province of South Vietnam. Enemy reconnaissance and probing activity near Khe Sanh has increased markedly in the last few weeks.

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The Communists could be using the time between now and the Tet holidays to complete their concentration around Khe Sanh in preparation for an offensive after Tet.

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Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared jointly by the Vietnamese Affairs Staff and the Office of Current Intelligence.

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The Communists could muster a total force of over 20,000 should they decide at some point to commit all personnel from the elements of the four divisions now in the general area. This is considerably more than they would need merely to take Khe Sanh. Their primary objective in attacking Khe Sanh would be to draw US reinforcements into the area, tie them down to static defensive positions, and inflict maximum casualties on US forces over a period of time.

The buildup of forces in Laos and western Quang Tri Province also strengthens North Vietnamese defense of the Laos corridor. [REDACTED]

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The Current Situation

1. Developments in recent days strongly suggest that the Vietnamese Communists intend once again to increase military pressure against the strategically placed outpost at Khe Sanh, on Route 9 in Quang Tri Province.

2. The post, approximately nine miles from the Laotian border, is used as a base for observation and interdiction of enemy infiltration activities in the area. It was last besieged in the winter of 1967, following the movement of the North Vietnamese 325C Division into the western DMZ area. Elements of the 325C have again moved into the region, after a period of rest and refitting in North Vietnam.

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3. The units mentioned above probably would take the primary role in any Communist effort to step up action at Khe Sanh. However, recent Communist deployments have put the enemy in a position to throw in substantial elements of the North Vietnamese 304th and 320th divisions in any major assault.

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If the Communists should decide at some point to commit all personnel from the elements of the four divisions now in the general area, they would be able to muster a total force of over 20,000.

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is tenuous evidence that battlefield preparations are being made by the 29th and 812th regiments.

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5. [] also indicates that the Communists are preparing for an offensive around Khe Sanh. Photography [] of an area about five miles northwest of Khe Sanh revealed 21 foxholes, two fortified hilltops, and heavy trail activity. On 26 and 27 December, an unknown force twice attempted to penetrate the defensive perimeter of friendly forces on Hill 861. On 27 December, a friendly reconnaissance team contacted an estimated 15-20 enemy four miles northeast of Khe Sanh. On 2 January, an enemy force of about six men engaged a Marine squad at a listening post about two miles north of Khe Sanh. The next day a patrol was grenaded; the patrol also observed lights on a trail near Route 9. These incidents all point to increased enemy reconnaissance against the Khe Sanh combat base.

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Enemy Objectives

6. The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the buildup around Khe Sanh is that the enemy may hope to wipe out the US garrison there and the Civilian Irregular Defense Corps (CIDG) camp at Lang Vei, about five miles to the southwest on Route 9. The Communists have long regarded Khe Sanh, located near the infiltration corridors in Laos, as a thorn in their side. According to the latest

available information, the garrison at Khe Sanh is defended by three infantry battalions and an artillery battalion of the 26th Marine Regiment. The CIDG camp at Lang Vei has about 320 men.

7. The Communists, however, do not need a force of upwards of 22,000 men to take Khe Sanh and Lang Vei. If the buildup is as extensive as suspected, and all of these units are destined to be committed to an offensive in the area, the primary purpose of the Communists may prove to be much broader. By attacking Khe Sanh, they would hope to draw US reinforcements into the area, tie them down to static defensive positions, and inflict maximum casualties on US forces over a period of time. By occupying the high ground around Khe Sanh and setting up ambushes along Route 9, the only overland route into the area, the enemy could make resupply and reinforcement a difficult and costly proposition, especially if he has developed an effective antiaircraft capability. Monsoon rains have closed large portions of Route 9, compounding the problem and making resupply largely dependent on airlift.

8. A final objective of the Khe Sanh buildup would be to harass and foil the strongpoint barrier system which is being implemented in the DMZ north of Khe Sanh and in the infiltration corridors in Laos.

9. Enemy strategy as outlined above fits in with the enemy strategy during 1967 of fighting the main force war partly from peripheral areas adjacent to border sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. By positioning his forces in these areas, the Communists seek to lure US units away from populated areas, disperse them, and inflict a maximum number of casualties in the process. This relieves pressure on main force units operating in populated areas and enables them to coordinate with local force units to disrupt the pacification program and attack allied outposts and base camps around urban areas. Since the start of the "winter-spring campaign" in October,

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the enemy has employed this strategy in II Corps and III Corps. In II Corps he has concentrated his forces operating in the highlands under a Front

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to direct ground action from border sanctuaries in Cambodia. A similar situation exists in III Corps, where a new Military Region (MR), designated MR 10 and consisting of the border provinces of Binh Long, Phuoc Long, and Quang Duc, was established in 1967. The establishment of MR 10 was followed by a rapid buildup of Communist forces in the area and attacks on targets near the Cambodian border, like Loc Ninh, Bu Dop, and Bo Duc. It is possible, therefore, that the buildup of Communist forces in the Khe Sanh area presages the establishment of a new Front headquarters to conduct operations in the border areas of Tri-Thien Military Region (Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces).

10. In summary, the enemy's objectives in any sustained offensive in the Khe Sanh area would be, at a minimum, to force the abandonment of the Khe Sanh base and the Lang Vei CIDG camp and to inflict heavy casualties. At the maximum, the Communists would hope to draw substantial US reinforcements from other areas in South Vietnam and tie them down in the Khe Sanh area. Their objective would be to give the other NVA units which operate in the Tri-Thien Military Region (the 5th, 6th, and 9th regiments) greater mobility to operate against the populated areas along the coast of Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. It would also give the Communists greater freedom of action along the DMZ. Whatever course of action is open to the enemy, he will be striving in addition to obtain that often touted major psychological victory against the allies.

11. There is a possibility that the deploying elements of the 304th and 320th divisions may merely intend to reinforce the 325C in operations around Khe Sanh before moving to infiltrate into South Vietnam farther south. Such a pattern occurred in the overrunning of A Shau in March 1966

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by the 95B and 101C regiments of the 325th Division, which later moved to reinforce the B-3 Front in the highlands. Indeed, several units originally involved in the October-November highlands campaign--the 88th, 101st, and possibly elements of the 33rd regiment--have since moved farther south to reinforce the northern III Corps.

12. The current locations of Communist units involved in the Khe Sanh buildup are as follows:

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